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ABSTRACT

The appropriateness of the market metaphor as a guide to education policy with respect to school choice is discussed, and the theory and practice of school choice and the history of the choice movement are traced. School choice has at times become a vehicle for racial and economic segregation and a way to deny, rather than promote, access to education for the poor. Choice in practice has been associated with racial politics and social discrimination against the poor. Where it has worked, it has depended less on the market than on a combination of strong political leadership, government commitment, private support, and an atmosphere that seeks the larger social good. It is argued that the real danger of market-based choice is not that some children might attend private schools at public expense, but that real questions of public school policy may go unanswered. The real need is to focus not on public and private schools as service-delivery mechanisms but on the differences between public and private schools as vehicles for deliberation, debate, and decision making. Market-oriented proposals are not likely to work and are likely to make education worse. Public education is the institution that gives the greatest opportunity for succeeding generations. Fifteen figures and three tables illustrate the discussion. (SLD)

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